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THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE AND SECURITY

SECURITY COUNCIL
Fifty-first year

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to paragraph 12 of General Assembly resolution 50/88 B of 19 December 1995, in which the Assembly requested the Secretary-General to report to it at its fifty-first session on the progress made in the implementation of the resolution. In the same paragraph of the resolution, the General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report every three months on the progress of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan. Two progress reports have been submitted to the Assembly: one on 3 April 1996, covering the period from 1 January to 31 March 1996 (A/50/908); and the other on 16 July 1996, for the period from 1 April to 30 June 1996 (A/50/908/Add.1).

2. The present report is, at the same time, intended to fulfil the request contained in paragraph 14 of Security Council resolution 1076 (1996) of 22 October 1996.

3. The present report describes the main events which have taken place in Afghanistan since the adoption of General Assembly resolution 50/88 B, including the activities of the Special Mission. Special attention has been given to the period between July and November 1996, when Afghanistan witnessed yet another round of upheavals with significant implications for its future and for the United Nations peacemaking efforts.

4. On 7 July 1996, I appointed Mr. Norbert Heinrich Holl as head of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan to replace Mr. Mahmoud Mestiri, who had resigned at the end of May for health reasons.

II. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Military developments

5. Until the beginning of September 1996, control of Afghanistan remained divided between a number of groupings. The Government forces of Mr. Burhanuddin Rabbani and his chief military commander Mr. Ahmad Shah Masoud controlled Kabul and five adjacent provinces in the north-east. General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his allies in the Supreme Coordination Council controlled six provinces in the north. The Hezb-i-Wahdat of Mr. Abdul Karim Khalili, a member of the Council, controlled the central regional province of Bamyan and parts of Ghor. The Eastern Zone Shura led by Governor Hajji Abdul Qadir, which was independent of the other factions and claimed neutrality between them, controlled the provinces of Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar. The Taliban movement controlled 14 provinces in the south and west and in geographical terms was the most significant of the factions.

6. Although the rest of Afghanistan remained relatively calm, fighting continued around Kabul between the forces of the Government and the Taliban, who were close to the outskirts of the city. The fighting involved the use of rockets, missiles and occasional aerial bombardment by each side of the other's positions. Civilian casualties and material damage in Kabul were heavy at times. The main supply road to Kabul from Jalalabad through Sarobi was often blocked, causing shortages of food and fuel in Kabul. The main road from Mazar-i-Sharif in the north through the Salang Tunnel also remained closed for most of this period, despite the undeclared ceasefire between the Government and the Supreme Coordination Council forces south of the Salang Pass.

7. The general calm in the north under General Dostum was briefly disturbed by the death, in an ambush in Mazar-i-Sharif on 25 June 1996, of General Rasul Pahlawan, deputy to General Dostum and head of the armed forces of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (NIMA) led by General Dostum. Clashes were reported between the supporters of General Dostum and General Pahlawan in the period immediately following the latter's death. The situation was soon brought under control and calm gradually returned to the area.

8. Dramatic changes, however, began at the beginning of September when the Taliban, advancing from Azra town in Logar province, attacked the Nangarhar forces under Governor Hajji Abdul Qadir, which were defending the strategic town of Hasarak, some 70 kilometres south-west of Jalalabad. After several hours of what was described as heavy fighting involving the use of fighter planes, artillery and tanks, the Taliban forces claimed victory. The Nangarhar forces withdrew, claiming to have suffered heavy casualties and requesting the International Committee of the Red Cross to assist in the evacuation of the dead and wounded to a hospital in Jalalabad. Hajii Qadir and some members of his Shura fled from Jalalabad to Peshawar in Pakistan. Others either changed sides or went into hiding. Subsequent reports suggested that the fighting was less intense than initially reported and that the Taliban's advance was largely due to the defending forces' reluctance to resist it.

9. On the following day, 11 September, the Taliban captured Jalalabad, putting an end to the four-year-old multi-party Shura of Nangarhar, Laghman and Kunar. Again initial reports seem to have exaggerated the intensity of the fighting, though the Kabul Government used aerial bombardment in an effort to prevent the Taliban from taking the city.

10. I issued a statement on 12 September expressing grave concern at the escalation of hostilities and the bombing of Jalalabad, which especially endangered the large population of internally displaced persons camped in the area. The spread of fighting to Nangarhar was also of concern as the Special Mission's headquarters were located in Jalalabad precisely because of the city's neutrality. I was obliged to instruct the head of the Mission to move his headquarters back to Islamabad as a temporary measure, until conditions permitted its relocation to Kabul.

11. After taking Jalalabad, the Taliban began to move against Sarobi on the road from Jalalabad to Kabul and captured it on 24 September. At the same time, they moved northwards towards Bagram airport, which had become the only airport available to the Kabul Government, Badakshan province and its capital Fayzabad. The situation in Kabul became tense and its security precarious as government forces fell into disarray. On 26 September, I ordered the evacuation of all non-essential United Nations staff, leaving only three international staff members in the capital. Many non-governmental organizations and foreign embassies also evacuated their staff from Kabul at this time. The head of the Special Mission issued a statement on 25 September appealing to the warring factions to cease all hostilities and to pursue negotiations under the auspices of the United Nations. He also called on those countries with influence in Afghanistan to persuade the warring factions to abandon the course of war and to search for peace in a spirit of reconciliation and mutual accommodation.

12. The Taliban forces entered Kabul in the early morning of 27 September and immediately took control of the city without perceptible resistance from the government forces which had largely withdrawn during the previous night. A six-member interim Council was formed under the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Rabbani to take charge of Kabul. The Taliban rigorously imposed the Shariah Islamic law on the Kabul population as they had done previously in other areas under their control. I issued a statement on 7 October 1996 expressing concern about the ability of the United Nations to continue its humanitarian and developmental work given some of the constraints imposed by the new regime in Kabul.

13. The Taliban pursued their military advance northwards from Kabul. A few days later they captured Charikar, followed by Bagram airport, and the strategic town of Jabal-os-Siraj at the foot of the Salang Pass, which put them face-to-face with the forces of General Dostum south of the Salang Tunnel. They also captured Gulbahar, a town at the entrance of the Panjshir valley, the base of Commander Masoud.

14. After withdrawing from Kabul, the government forces regrouped in the Panjshir valley and had little difficulty in repelling attacks against them by the Taliban. Two weeks later they launched a counter-attack and retook such

strategic places as Jabal-os-Siraj, Bagram and Charikar and moved to within rocket range of Kabul. Meanwhile, General Dostum and his allies in the Supreme Coordination Council abandoned their neutrality between the Taliban and the government forces and on 11 October concluded a new alliance known as Supreme Council for the Defence of Afghanistan. It comprised NIMA, the Hezb-i-Wahdat, Mr. Rabbani and Commander Masoud. The relationship between the Supreme Council and Mr. Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who had been Prime Minister in Mr. Rabbani's Government since 26 June 1996, remains obscure. The purpose of the new alliance was to check, by military means if necessary, any further advances by the Taliban forces.

15. Since mid-October the military situation around Kabul has remained static, with desultory shelling and rocketing and occasional air raids but no serious armoured or infantry activity by either side. There has, however, been a recrudescence of military activity in the west of the country where Taliban forces operating out of Herat made initial incursions into NIMA-controlled territory in Badghis and Faryab provinces, as a riposte to the government forces' counter-attack to the north of Kabul, but they were subsequently repulsed by NIMA forces. At the same time, there have been reports of anti-Taliban unrest in the eastern provinces of Kunar and Nangarhar by elements of the former administration of these areas. The unrest has so far not developed into a full-scale military confrontation.

16. The most significant and disturbing consequence of these military developments is that Afghanistan is effectively divided, for the first time in recent history, between north and south. The division is not only military but also ethnic: the Taliban, whose leadership and forces are largely composed of Pashtuns, control almost all the Pashtun majority areas; and the Supreme Council controls almost all the areas where the majority is Hazara, Tajik or Uzbek.

Former Afghan President Najibullah

17. One of the first acts of the Taliban administration in Kabul was the extrajudicial murder of the former President Najibullah and his brother Shahpur Ahmadzai in the early hours of 27 September. At about 0130 hours on that day, a group of Taliban soldiers forcibly entered the Special Mission premises where Mr. Najibullah, his brother and two other colleagues had been living since taking refuge in the United Nations premises in April 1992. After some discussion, the Taliban soldiers forced Mr. Najibullah at gunpoint to enter their vehicles, which took him away in the direction of the presidential palace. About two hours later, another group of Taliban soldiers broke into the Mission compound and forcibly removed Mr. Ahmadzai, under the pretext of taking him to see his brother and promising to return him and Mr. Najibullah to the Mission premises within 30 minutes. At about 0600 hours, the United Nations international personnel in the Mission compound were informed that the bodies of Mr. Najibullah and his brother were hanging in Ariana square in the city centre, a short distance from the compound.

18. Mr. Najibullah's predicament had been a matter of concern to me for the previous four years. I had personally intervened with the Kabul authorities on a number of occasions to persuade them that Mr. Najibullah, who had cooperated

with the United Nations in an attempt to transfer power peacefully in 1992, should be allowed to leave Afghanistan safely. Most recently I had instructed the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs to put new proposals in this regard to the Kabul authorities during his visit to Afghanistan in mid-September (see paras. 37-39 below). They had consistently maintained that they wanted to resolve the problem but saw great political difficulties in doing so. They had nevertheless shown interest in the ideas put forward by the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs.

19. However the Taliban's seizure of Kabul and murder of Mr. Najibullah brought these discussions to an end and raised new issues relating to violation of the immunity of United Nations premises and the execution of persons who had sought refuge in those premises.

Current political developments

20. The fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 27 September has generated a great deal of political and diplomatic activity inside Afghanistan, in the region and internationally; it has also significantly affected the work of the Special Mission. Inside Afghanistan, a new realignment of forces emerged as a new anti-Taliban alliance replaced the Supreme Coordination Council. Control of the country is now divided between two major forces, the Taliban and the Supreme Council for the Defence of Afghanistan. The capture of Kabul, meanwhile, has propelled the Taliban into the international spotlight as their structure, administration, leadership, policies, political agenda and military aims are subjected to close scrutiny by the international community and the media.

21. At the regional level, some countries were alarmed at the prospect that the Taliban might overrun the whole of Afghanistan, while others took a less negative view of developments. The Russian Federation and four Central Asian countries adopted at Almaty on 4 October a declaration expressing concern that the flames of war should be coming nearer to the borders of countries belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States. They declared that the Afghan conflict posed a direct threat to their national interests and security and those of the region. At the initiative of the Islamic Republic of Iran, a regional conference on Afghanistan was held at Tehran on 29 and 30 October. The conference adopted a declaration expressing concern at recent events and appealed for an early settlement through mediation by the international community.

22. The Security Council held several meetings and informal consultations on the Afghan situation before and after the fall of Kabul, and repeatedly requested me and the Special Mission to keep it fully informed of events. On 22 August, the President of the Security Council addressed a letter to me on this subject. After a formal meeting on 16 October, the Council adopted resolution 1076 (1996) on 22 October, in which it, inter alia, called upon all Afghan parties immediately to cease all armed hostilities, to renounce the use of force, to put aside their differences and to engage in a political dialogue aimed at achieving national reconciliation and a lasting political settlement of the conflict and establishing a fully representative and broad-based transitional government of national unity.

Humanitarian situation

23. The humanitarian situation in Afghanistan remains serious and is likely to deteriorate sharply over the winter months.

24. In spite of the destruction of 300,000 mines and the clearance of 153.8 square kilometres, it is estimated that up to 10 million mines still remain. Mine-related deaths have soared in recent months, owing to the massive number of civilians moving back into former front-line territory. It is estimated that on average one person is killed per hour by a mine incident. In Kabul, three persons per day report to hospitals with serious injuries caused by mines or unexploded ordnance. This rate is likely to increase in coming months as the population, especially children, enter former areas of conflict in search of firewood.

25. It is estimated that up to 1 in 10 Afghans suffer from a disability of some kind: war has created a large population suffering from blindness, amputations, paralysis or trauma. Few are receiving adequate, if any, treatment. Preventable communicable diseases are the leading cause of death among Afghan children. Malnutrition is now estimated to affect 15 to 20 per cent of all children under the age of five. Health problems are exacerbated by limited access to safe drinking water, estimated to be available to only 5 per cent of the rural population and at best 40 per cent of the urban population.

26. The food security situation will worsen as winter sets in, especially for the urban population. It is estimated that up to 600,000 persons in Kabul have an inadequate diet and may suffer from severe malnutrition. Some 700,000 Afghans now depend upon subsidized bread. A further 210,000 receive food assistance through the World Food Programme food-for-work projects for rehabilitation and reconstruction.

27. Afghanistan has the highest rate of infant, child and maternal mortality in Asia. It is listed as the last of 135 countries on the United Nations Development Programme Gender Development Index, which measures female literacy, life expectancy and school enrolment. The prospects for addressing this situation have taken a sharp turn for the worse in recent weeks.

28. Over 2 million Afghan refugees live outside the country. There are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people, including up to 50,000 newly displaced as a result of recent fighting in the north-west.

29. The security of United Nations and other aid community staff, both national and international, is a matter of growing concern. Staff have been subject to threats, intrusion into their private and official premises and kidnapping. These have led the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to put a hold on some of their programmes in Kabul until all UNHCR local staff are able to resume their activities, in particular the four who are still in detention.

30. Violations of basic human rights, in particular those of women, have increased considerably, notably in Kabul since the Taliban takeover. In areas

under their control, women and girls have been denied education and employment. On 7 October, I issued a statement in New York on the status of women and girls in Afghanistan, in which I stressed that the ability of the various United Nations agencies to operate in Afghanistan was vitally affected by policies of unequal treatment. I shall continue to address this issue patiently but consistently, through the Special Mission, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance to Afghanistan and the United Nations agencies in Afghanistan.

III. ACTIVITIES OF THE SPECIAL MISSION

31. Upon his appointment in July, the head of the Special Mission visited New York to be briefed and to receive instructions. He had consultations here with a number of Member States and stopped in Washington and Moscow for talks with senior government officials, before arriving in the region on 23 July and conducting a first round of consultations there between then and 13 August.

32. The initial round was devoted to an in-depth exchange of views with Afghan leaders and others. The head of the Special Mission briefed his interlocutors on his approach to his task and impressed on them the urgency of breaking the deadlock and the need to cooperate with the United Nations, beginning with an immediate ceasefire. He also stressed his intention to ensure better coordination between the United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations and the Special Mission.

33. In pursuit of these aims, the head of the Special Mission travelled widely in Afghanistan. He met in Kabul with President Burhanuddin Rabbani; Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar; the leader of the Ittehad-i-Islami, Mr. Abdul Rasul Sayyaf; the deputy leader of the Harakat-i-Islami, Mr. Ali Javed; the leader of the Hezb-i-Wahdat breakaway faction, Mr. Mohammed Akbar; the Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzai; and the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Najibullah Lafrae. In Mazar-i-Sharif and Shebarghan, he met with the leader of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, and his senior military and political officials, as well as with the deputy leader of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, Mr. Mohaqqiq. In Kandahar, he met the Taliban leadership, represented by the deputy leader of the Taliban Council, Mullah Mohammed Hassan; the Governor of Kandahar, Mullah Mohammed Hassan Rahmani; the official-in-charge of foreign affairs, Hajji Abdul Jalil; and the secretary of the Taliban Council, Mr. Mohammed Tahir. In Yaokolang, in Bamyan province, he met with the leader of the Hezb-i-Wahdat, Mr. Abdul Karim Khalili, and members of his Central Committee, and later with a group of professional women representing the women's wing of the Hezb-i-Wahdat. In Jalalabad, he met with Governor Hajji Abdul Qadir and members of his Eastern Zone Shura, and visited a camp of internally displaced persons located outside Jalalabad.

34. In Islamabad, the head of the Special Mission had talks with the leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (NIFA), Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani; the leader of the Harakat-i-Islami, Ayatollah Assef Mohseini; and other prominent

Afghan personalities. He met several times with the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Mr. Najmuddin Sheikh, and other senior government officials. He then visited Peshawar for a meeting with the representatives of the international and Afghan non-governmental organizations working in Afghanistan, and with the members of the Council for Mutual Understanding of Afghanistan, a body representing a group of Afghan intellectuals.

35. Following this initial round of his consultations, the head of the Special Mission reported to me the following conclusions. There was a genuine sense of frustration among his interlocutors, who showed increasing anxiety about the political deadlock and the deteriorating military situation. Most of them tended to blame the stalemate on foreign interference, especially through the supply of arms and other military assistance. The Taliban and General Dostum reiterated their demand that Mr. Rabbani step down as a precondition for any negotiations. All the Afghan leaders showed undiminished support for the activities of the Special Mission, reaffirming their confidence in the United Nations as the organization best suited to break the stalemate. They repeatedly urged the Mission to put forward its own peace plan or at least a blue-print for a settlement.

36. I instructed the head of the Special Mission to pursue the peace process as intensively as possible. He should maintain contact with a wide spectrum of Afghan leaders and others, including segments of Afghan civil society, such as women's organizations and professional groups. I also requested him to press the leaders of the warring factions to agree to an immediate cessation of hostilities and to begin serious negotiations, through the good offices of the United Nations.

37. In order to demonstrate the importance I attached to the revitalization of the United Nations peacemaking efforts in Afghanistan, I dispatched the Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs to the region between 10 and 17 September 1996.

38. In Kabul, the Under-Secretary-General and the head of the Special Mission met with President Rabbani, Prime Minister Hekmatyar, Mr. Rasul Sayyaf, Commander Masoud and Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Ghafoorzai, as well as with Mr. Najibullah. In Shebarghan, they met with General Dostum and the deputy head of the Hezb-i-Wahdat representing Mr. Khalili and in Kandahar with a delegation of the Taliban leadership led by the movement's Attorney-General, Mullah Abbas. They were obliged, however, to cancel their planned visit to Jalalabad, the location of the Mission's headquarters, as government aircraft were bombing the city, recently taken by the Taliban. In Islamabad, they held discussions with the Foreign Secretary of Pakistan, Mr. Najmuddin Sheikh, and with the Minister of the Interior, Mr. Nasrullah Babar.

39. Upon his return to New York, the Under-Secretary-General reported to me on the situation in Afghanistan as well as the activities of the Special Mission. Following his report, I confirmed that the Mission should intensify its consultations with all the Afghan parties, especially the Taliban, and that it should try to get each of them to subscribe to certain basic principles, such as a renunciation of the military option; agreement to participate in a phased

political process; negotiation in good faith; acceptance of a ceasefire; acknowledgment of the role of the United Nations in cooperation with the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in facilitating the peace process; and full support to and cooperation with the Special Mission. The Mission should also continue to develop ideas on the elements of a political process which could be floated during consultations with the Afghan parties.

40. Shortly thereafter, however, the Taliban took Kabul, creating the risk that hostilities would escalate. I accordingly instructed the Special Mission to concentrate on an immediate cessation of hostilities. Strenuous efforts were also to be made to establish a working relationship with the Taliban authorities in Kabul, in order to ensure that the United Nations maintained an open channel for communication with and between all the parties and to address certain humanitarian issues which had assumed greater prominence since the Taliban capture of Kabul. It was to impress on all the Afghan leaders that Afghanistan is a member of the United Nations and therefore bound by the Charter of the Organization, including those provisions relating to the equal rights of men and women, and the various human rights instruments to which Afghanistan is a party. It was also to ensure that appropriate conditions existed for the United Nations agencies to continue to provide relief to the needy people of Afghanistan.

41. The head of the Special Mission accordingly travelled to Kandahar on 28 September for a meeting with the Taliban leadership which was represented by the Governor of Kandahar and member of the Council of the Taliban, Mullah Mohammed Hassan Rahmani, and two other members of the Council. They encouraged him to meet with the person appointed by the Taliban as Prime Minister, Mullah Mohammed Rabbani, on all issues of concern to the United Nations peace mission in particular and the United Nations in general, including the gender issues, human rights, the continuation of humanitarian assistance and the application of the general amnesty declared earlier by the Taliban leader, Amir Mohammed Omar.

42. In pursuit of the ceasefire objective, the head of the Special Mission travelled to Mazar-i-Sharif and Shebarghan on several occasions during the first half of October to meet with General Dostum and once with Mr. Rabbani and representatives of Commander Masoud. His purpose was to arrange a direct negotiation between General Dostum and the Taliban (represented by Mullah Ghaus and others) at a neutral location acceptable to both sides. Although General Dostum and Mr. Ghaus initially agreed to such a meeting and the Mission made preparations for it, this direct negotiation did not take place, apparently as a result of the escalation of the conflict between the two sides as the Taliban forces tried to push northwards from Kabul.

43. After visiting Kabul on 21 October for talks with the Taliban, the head of the Special Mission flew to Mazar-i-Sharif on 23 October to meet General Dostum and representatives of other members of the Supreme Council for the Defence of Afghanistan. The Pakistani Minister of the Interior was in the city at the same time. The head of the Mission was invited to participate in the discussion of a draft ceasefire accord which the Pakistani Minister had been negotiating with the Taliban leadership and which he believed they would sign if it was accepted by General Dostum and his allies. The meeting accepted a number of amendments

proposed by the head of the Mission. However, the Pakistani initiative faltered at the last moment when members of the Supreme Council insisted that the agreement should also cover the demilitarization of Kabul.

44. Following this setback, the head of the Special Mission continued to shuttle between the Taliban and the Supreme Council in order to persuade them to meet under United Nations auspices to resume the negotiation of a ceasefire. These efforts led to a meeting in his office in Islamabad on 7 November at which the two sides were represented by Mullah Ghaus, acting Foreign Minister of the Taliban, and General Painda Muhammad, General Dostum's representative in Islamabad. No specific agreements were reached on this occasion but the two sides agreed to continue talks on a ceasefire.

IV. MEETING OF REGIONAL STATES AND OTHER STATES WITH INFLUENCE IN AFGHANISTAN

45. Pursuant to paragraphs 3 and 4 of General Assembly resolution 50/88 B, as well as paragraph 7 of Security Council resolution 1076 (1996), I invited a group of 19 regional and other interested Member States, together with OIC, to a meeting of consultation in New York on 18 November 1996. The purposes of the one-day meeting were twofold: to brief the participants on the current United Nations efforts in Afghanistan in the political, humanitarian and developmental fields; and to discuss with them what more they could do to support those efforts, with special reference to the conclusion of a ceasefire and the initiation of a political process leading to a negotiated settlement of the conflict. The Member States invited, all of whom accepted the invitation, were China, Egypt, France, Germany, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy, Japan, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America and Uzbekistan. I informed the Presidents of the General Assembly and the Security Council of the results of the meeting by letters dated 20 November (A/51/689 and S/1996/966, respectively).

46. All participants agreed that the present situation could not be allowed to continue. It was intolerable in terms of the suffering it imposed on the Afghan people. It was also intolerable in the threats that it presented to the region and the world: threats of regional destabilization, drugs, terrorism and illegal arms flows.

47. The participants also reaffirmed the principles enshrined in General Assembly resolution 50/88 B, namely respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity; the need for the Afghan parties to negotiate a political settlement that would will respect the rights of all groups, including their human rights; and an end to foreign interference, especially through the supply of arms. And they reaffirmed support for the kind of peace process outlined in resolution 50/88 B.

48. All the participants confirmed that the United Nations had a central role to play in helping the Afghan parties define and implement a peace process, in

close consultation with OIC, whose efforts should be complementary to those of the United Nations. They were unanimous in their appreciation of the efforts of the Special Mission under the leadership of Mr. Holl, especially his current efforts to bring about a ceasefire in and around Kabul, and pledged their continued support for those efforts. I was particularly encouraged that they responded positively to my call for close coordination between their own mediating efforts and those of the United Nations.

49. The participants responded positively on a number of other key issues. They indicated that they would use their influence with the various factions to persuade them to give up the military option and join in the common search for a negotiated peace. They gave a positive response to my request that countries with influence in Afghanistan should be ready, individually or collectively, to help the United Nations efforts when the United Nations so requested. Most expressed the view that it would be useful for the countries at the meeting to continue to meet informally from time to time and at various levels. There was also widespread support for the idea that in due course an international conference should be convened to support negotiations and endorse their results. A number of delegations offered to host such a conference and/or earlier direct negotiations between the Afghan parties.

50. The delegations also showed a keen interest in collective action to curb or halt the flow of arms and ammunition into Afghanistan. Some suggested that the Wassenaar regime for the point of origin control of conventional weapons transfers could be useful in this context. Others favoured a formal arms embargo by the Security Council.

51. The delegations were unanimous in their desire to alleviate the suffering which the Afghan conflict imposed on the ordinary people of that country. A number of them also shared my view that the promise of a major international effort to reconstruct Afghanistan when peace was restored could itself be an important incentive to the faction leaders to negotiate a peace settlement.

V. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

52. I am heartened by the fact that the international community seems prepared to re-focus its attention on the situation in Afghanistan. I believe that the meeting which took place at my invitation on 18 November was a useful first gathering of a group of countries which are particularly well placed to support the efforts of the Secretary-General to carry out the mandates entrusted to him by the General Assembly and the Security Council. It is my intention to convene further informal meetings of the group from time to time at various levels.

53. The lead role in the United Nations efforts to help bring peace to Afghanistan lies with the Special Mission to Afghanistan. The Mission will continue to explore how it can most effectively assist the Afghan parties to negotiate a broad-based settlement. To that end it will maintain contact with all the parties involved in the conflict and will observe strict neutrality and impartiality in its work, impressing on the faction leaders that their genuine cooperation with the Mission is vital to the success of any peace plan. The

immediate focus of its efforts is the negotiation of a ceasefire, to be accompanied or followed by the demilitarization of Kabul and the establishment of a neutral force to police the city while political dialogue continues, with the assistance of the Mission if the parties so wish, on the creation of a fully representative and broad-based mechanism for national reconciliation.

54. I have already taken the necessary steps to strengthen the Mission by appointing the four additional political affairs officers authorized in General Assembly resolution 50/88 B. In addition, I propose to increase its military advisers from the current two to five, so as to enhance its capability to understand the fast-changing military situation and to facilitate the parties' discussion of options for the demilitarization of Kabul and other such measures. I also propose to assign two civilian police advisers to the Mission in connection with current discussions between the Afghan parties about the establishment of a neutral force to police a demilitarized Kabul.

55. In cooperation with the United Nations agencies and programmes operating in Afghanistan, the Special Mission will continue to raise with the relevant authorities issues of equal treatment, the observance of human rights, and the unhindered provision of humanitarian assistance to the needy. The Mission will also insist on strict respect for the privileges and immunities of United Nations staff and premises.

56. The suffering of the Afghan civilian population, who continue to bear the main brunt of the civil war, and the dangers that that war creates for regional stability, oblige the international community to intensify its search for a peaceful solution, despite the fact that certain Afghan parties seem to continue to favour the military option. It is fortunate, however, that the great majority of Afghans want the United Nations to play a central role in the search for a solution. I therefore seek the General Assembly's endorsement of the approach set out in this report and in particular of the proposed additions to the strength of the Special Mission.